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ABSTRACT

In a competitive market training economy, vocational education and training (VET) and small business in Australia face a number of challenges. They need to qualify the extent of lifelong learning skills being used in the small firm workplace, define the range of learning partnerships both within VET and the wider informal learning community in which small business will invest, and decide how this might influence infrastructure for developing learning communities in regional Australia for the future. An alternative community capacity building model has been suggested. It is comprised of nine "ecologies" or microcultures of learning of equivalent importance in developing lifelong learning partners, which is considered essential for developing integrated learning communities between small business and VET. The microcultures are political, attitudes, partnerships, skills, information, technology, organizational, social capital, and regional learning ecologies. Each ecology needs to be in harmony for a lifelong learning partnership to be sustainable; any weak segment or capacity will reflect on the success or stability of the learning partnership for the long term. (Contains 85 references.) (YLB)

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Community capacity building in regional VET: small business and developing an integrated lifelong learning community

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Small and micro business need to adopt lifelong learning on a whole of firm basis to survive in an knowledge economy/society (and may be doing so already informally in the workplace), but what does lifelong learning mean in the context of the small firm, and how might that impact on developing learning partnerships with vocational education and training (VET) both formally and informally? There is a need to qualify the extent of lifelong learning skills being used in the small firm workplace, define the range of learning partnerships both within VET and the wider informal learning community in which small business will invest, and how this might influence infrastructure for developing learning communities in regional Australia for the future. This paper argues that there are similar challenges for VET and small business in a competitive market training economy, and suggests an alternative community capacity building model of nine 'ecologies' or microcultures of learning of equivalent importance in developing lifelong learning partners, considered essential for developing integrated learning communities between small business and VET. Each of these ecologies needs to be in harmony for a lifelong learning partnership to be sustainable; any weak segment or capacity will reflect on the success or stability of the learning partnership for the long term.

Lifelong learning and small business: redefining the challenges for VET

Lifelong learning as strategy for VET for developing learning communities has become a topic of much debate globally (Blunkett 1998; Brown 2000; DFEE 2000, 1998a, 1998b, 1998c; Gore 1999; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development 2000, 1996; Ralph 1999a, 1999b; Seiichiro 1992), but there is criticism of the claims of a 'catch all policy', and the difference between the rhetoric and the reality of a global educational strategy which is being marketed as the panacea for the learning needs of all local communities (Edwards 1999; Oliver 1999; Martin 1999). Fundamentally a central issue for the small firm workplace is balanced participation in VET from the large and small employer, when the evidence from a comparison of learning cultures in five Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries found that most small firm employers undertake *even less training than their employees* (Kearns and Papadopoulos 2000). Yarnit (2000) has argued that small businesses show a poor record in workplace learning, and studies of promulgating a culture of lifelong learning in the workplace found employers are not clear about (aware?) of their role (DFEE 1998, 1999). Interestingly, Matlay (2000) found that although small firms considered themselves learning organisations, the majority had not invested in any formal training in the last twelve months.

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For VET in Australia, the Senate Standing Review (2000) has found, disconcertingly, that the quality of totally on-the-job learning is questionable, with most employers taking little interest in training plans and developing pathways through learning for employees; finding the correct balance of enterprise specific/industry wide (lifelong learning?) skills is problematic and there is a need for learning quality to be monitored more closely in the workplace. Returns on investment of training have found a reduction in employer commitment to formal training (Moy and McDonald 2000) and that any training in the small firm is still perceived as a short-term immediate cost as opposed to a long-term investment. Hopkins (1998, p 7) has stated that there are limitations on what can be realistically expected of enterprises in lifelong learning. There are also several threats to the national VET strategy (1998-2003) for enterprises and the need 'for a better understanding of the ways in which work and learning are emeshed'. A significant question remains: if work is learning for employers and employees in small business, is it lifelong learning?

There are, though, other alternative discourses in this debate. Field (1998) has concluded essentially for shifting the focus from training to learning in the small firm. Whilst the formal adoption of accredited training by small business is on the decline (Moy and McDonald 2000), there is a paucity of evidence on the type of lifelong learning skills being used already in the small firm workplace outside of formal VET, and discussion in VET of the types of learning partnerships in which small business will invest. The CRLRA (2000) described learning partners as being 'exogenous and endogenous' - within and outside the community - and demonstrated the wide range of partners and learning networks being developed formally and informally, which are integral to a healthy VET community in the regions.

McGiveny (2000) has found, too, that more credence needs to be given to the informal learning being undertaken in the wider community, and suggests that formalising these arrangements in VET is not the answer for building learning communities. These pathways are successful for learners because they are localised, learner driven, non-accredited, informal, non-threatening and grounded in the community. Another alternative discourse in VET has called for a redefinition of the learning and value of the 'practical wisdom' already being gained in the workplace which may be difficult to measure, accredit and qualify (Beckett and Hagar 1997; Boud 1998; Candy and Mathews 1998; Hawke 1998). Gibb (1999) has also advocated for a wider definition of what training means for small business to include information services, information providers, business networks as well as VET providers. If this is the case, to what extent do often disparate, competing organisations in VET work as lifelong learning partners and what is a realistic role for the small business community?

Research methodology

The methodology is a community capacity building (Allen 1999), qualitative case study of the range of learning partnerships - from the formal structured arrangements with VET, to the informal learning partnerships in existence with small business in the Adelaide Hills region, South Australia. Small business is defined as the owner-managed, small (6-19 employees) or micro firm (1-5) businesses that may be operating in the 'for profit' or 'not for profit' sector of the economy, or in fact a combination of both (Neighbourhood House Coordinator in conversation, February

2001). Other than the work of Kearns (1996) on Industry Education partnerships; Kearns and Papadopoulos (2000); and the DFEE (1998) on learning partnerships policy in the UK, I have not yet found a suitable definition of a lifelong learning partnership for this study, so I am going to suggest one or two somewhat tentative definitions:

1. A lifelong learning partnership is an ecumenical learning pathway of collaboration between diverse learning organisations in the community for the benefit of the learner.

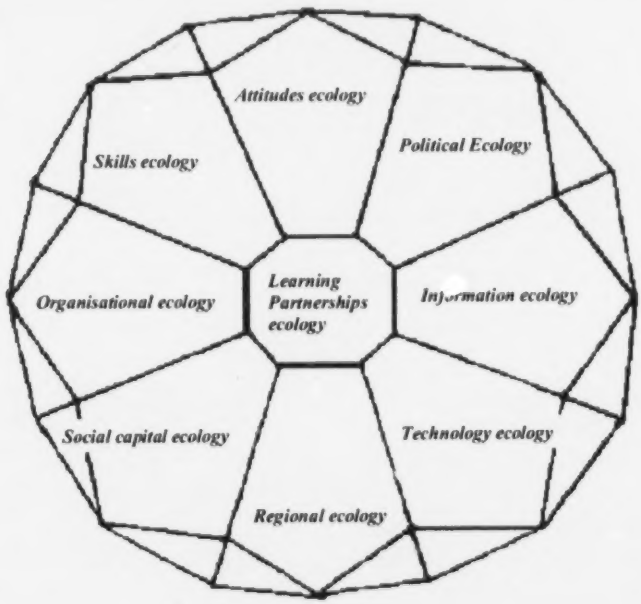
2. A lifelong learning partnership is a shared, balanced commitment to building a learning community by all stakeholders, with the learner as central.

3. A lifelong learning partnership emphasises equitable participation by all partners in learning for community capacity building in regions for the future.

4. A lifelong learning partnership bridges the divides of the for profit and not-for-profit sectors of the economy for the social wellbeing of the individual, the organisation and the community.

Conceptual framework: a blueprint for an integrated learning ecology

My conceptual framework is based on nine key overlapping themes of analysis which it is intended will shed light on the tenth theme: the challenges and barriers to building an integrated lifelong learning ecology for VET. The model presents a kaleidoscopic view of the regional microcultures that I have called 'learning ecologies' as they relate to the VET landscape of VET/small business learning partnerships in the Adelaide Hills.



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These microcultures include:

1. Political ecology (VET and economic/resource sustainability and building local infrastructure, best use of existing resources and economic capital in a market economy).

2. Attitudes ecology (building civil and personal capital and values between business in its community, corporate responsibility and social entrepreneurialism).

3. Partnerships ecology (collaborative/mutual benefit, shared responsibility between organisations, developing exogenous and endogenous learning partners: building synergistic capital).

4. Skills ecology (redefining lifelong learning skills in the small firm building human capital, self-generation, pathways through formal, informal and non-formal VET).

5. Information ecology (sharing information/intellectual capital, building information networks, information dissemination and gathering, information literacy).

6. Technology ecology (virtual community, networking, e-learning and virtual learning partners, developing virtual capital business to business, business to consumer).

7. Organisational ecology (learning organisation, the lifelong learning firm, building intellectual and human capital, local leadership).

8. Social capital ecology (community capacity building, building collaboration and trust between individuals and groups).

9. Regional learning ecology (learning community, building cultural capital, a healthy environment and social wellbeing).

10. Building an integrated ecology (strategy/synergy, a holistic model).

The research questions

1. What learning partnerships exist between VET and libraries with small business in this region and where are the challenges for small business/VET lifelong learning partnerships?

2. How are lifelong learning skills defined in small business and to what extent are small firm employers adopting lifelong learning and lifelong learning

partnerships with VET?

3. What other learning partnerships exist with small business in this and other learning communities that might be applicable for lifelong learning in VET in this region, and why?

4. What are the implications for VET and small business in developing lifelong learning partnerships for the future and a learning community in the Adelaide Hills?

The political ecology: challenging the rhetoric

It could be argued that lifelong learning (Longworth 1996, 1999) as an educational strategy for VET is being marketed globally as the panacea to all regional, community and organisational learning needs, but there are those who remain somewhat cynical of the lifelong learning discourse and its re-emergence as being central to VET policy - and of the far reaching assumptions about its many claims (Law 2000; Martin 1999; Sanguinetti 2000). Yarnit (2000), in a survey of learning towns and learning cities, states that in the UK, even with the new lifelong learning initiatives, there are still two parallel systems of education and training working side by side, but with little integration between the two, to the detriment of the learner. Does a similar situation exist here in Australia, where it has been voiced that VET policy development has taken place at great speed, with little grounded theory upon which to develop policy for the future or understanding of how learning actually occurs in the workplace context? Of particular concern is what Kearns and Papadopoulos (2000, p vii) describe as the gap in an outmoded policy framework within VET in Australia, where demand-side policies are no longer suitable for changing conditions in a state of flux. They advocate the development of new cross-sectoral learning paradigms that encompass an understanding of the local microcultures of regions.

Regional ecology: increasing participation and balancing metrocentrism

Butler and Lawrence (1996) documented the challenges for VET in regional Australia and discussed what they termed the effects of 'metrocentrism' of VET in local communities. Since then, the report of the Regional Australia Summit: Theme Group for Education and Training (1999, p 5) have identified three key areas of requirement for VET in regional Australia: tailoring a globally driven, lifelong learning directive to the needs of local regional communities in VET; development of community plans for education, training and lifelong learning as part of whole community strategies; and identifying and supporting the key 'initiators' or brokers with the spark, energy and enthusiasm.

For VET and providers of VET information services, often working under considerable resource restraint in the regions, a dilemma is that small business does not participate to any great extent in formal education and training; tailoring programs to their changing, diverse needs is difficult. Also, often on the demand side, small firm awareness of the existing education and training and information services to support them in regions could be improved. The Senate Standing Committee (1999) found that for the neighbouring region of Onkaparinga, small business was largely unaware of the existing assistance and information services available to them. Kearns and Papadopoulos (2000) have said that what is needed is

a shared national vision for the future for lifelong learning, which is built on successful local learning partnerships between all VET stakeholders for what they term 'joined up policies' at the regional level. However, this is a considerable challenge if people work in what can be very competitive, isolating workplace cultures in both VET and small business.

Attitudes ecology: two disparate workplace cultures?

In terms of attitudes to lifelong learning, the ANTA (2000) study of marketing strategies for lifelong learning in Australia found the disinterested quadrant of learners still predominantly comprises the small business sector. Harris et al (1998) argued that small business is still rather an anomaly for VET. Kearns et al (1999) stated that to make practical, proactive changes for the future, we need to understand the tensions and bottlenecks to developing business community partnerships in lifelong learning in VET in Australia, to overcome much of the rhetoric associated with the lifelong learning debate. Some have argued that: VET has negated the role of the employer, choosing only to focus on the learning needs of the employee or trainee (Butler et al 1999); we know less about the learning needs of the employer, the nature of embedded workplace competencies, context-dependent learning and how it transfers (Misko 1999a); and we know less about the nature of collective competence as it relates to learning in the workplace (Beckett and Hagar 1997; Boud 1998; Childs and Regine 1998; Waterhouse et al 1999). Longworth (1996, 1999) states that for lifelong learning to be sustainable, we need to move beyond a stakeholder society to one of building trust and collaboration - but this is quite a challenge, as Mannion Brunt (1999) found particularly between education providers and employers, and as Fryer (2000) in a keynote speech to the Adult Learners Week Conference (2000) commented pertinently:

> ... the cogs of our formal learning structures are totally our of sync with the cogs of small business.

Organisational ecology: the learning small firm: integral to a healthy community?

Ferrier (2000) has emphasised the need for standards in the accounting for intellectual capital in firms as a means of measuring not just economic outcome in organisations, but the capacity of their intangibles. Are Australian small firms learning organisations? How do they build knowledge capacity, and if not, how might that impact on developing learning partnerships? Small and very small business are responsible for the majority of the employment and innovation in regional Australia and play a vital, but often overlooked role in the infrastructure of regional communities (Kilpatrick and Bell 1998; MBCG 1999; SARDTF 1999; Senate Employment Workplace Relations and Small Business 1999).

The dominant discourse on learning has argued that small business has a long history of disinterest and a lack of participation and awareness of formal vocational education and training (Baker and Wooden 1995; Matlay 1999, 2000; Robinson 1999). An alternative voice argues quite to the contrary; that they have always been a visible presence informally, but that they show a preference for practical, business-focused learning on the job. Referred to by Becket and Hagar as 'phronesis', this tends to be undocumented, difficult to accredit and undervalued (Beckett and Hagar

1997; Boud 1999; Field 1999). To what extent does this mismatch in understanding of worthwhile knowledge hinder the development of learning partners in VET?

Information ecology: the essence of all equitable partnerships?

Matlay (2000) has written about the loss of learning, or knowledge degradation, in small firms that do not share information between people in the small firm workplace. Davenport (1998) argued that all learning organisations need a healthy information ecology, and Bruce (1998) has emphasised the importance of developing information literacy skills in the workplace.

On the supply side, studies in the UK have found better participation in lifelong learning is also about supplying independent, non-biased information to adults, meeting their individual information needs and tailoring this to the learner/client groups in the local community (DFEE 1999). Kearns and Papadopoulos (2000) have stated that our information networks on lifelong learning are not as developed in Australia as their overseas counterparts, both in the real and virtual sense. Some have voiced in the changes to the new VET frameworks. What has resulted is a fragmentation of VET programs and VET information services to small business community (Butler et al 1999; NCVER 1997) and a possible mismatch in tailoring VET to the small business community needs (DEETYA 1998).

Alternatively, on the demand side, there may also be information literacy skills gaps in the small firm sector. The Micro Business Consulting Group (1998) addressed the adoption of information technology by micro business and concluded it was critical for the survival of the sector. They found that the level of awareness of information services is still low; too much information can be a problem for the micro business, and the cost to the firm of finding the right information can be an impediment.

A changing skills ecology: the need for 'lifewide entrepreneurial skills'?

Kearns and Papadopoulos (2000) have argued for redressing the balance between the prowess and high esteem given to knowledge skills and the traditional assumptions of the low skill base attached to practical attributes and technical skills. Their argument is reinforced by the work of Beckett and Hagar (1997), Field (1998) and Hopkins (1998), which premised a shift in thinking from training to learning; redefining the nature of learning in the workplace context; and moving from 'an epistemology of knowledge to an epistemology of practice'. This has important ramifications for defining new skills sets for the small firm, for developing a new workplace learning paradigm (Boud 1998; Candy and Mathews 1998) and for building these lifelong entrepreneurial skills into training package development for the future.

Longworth (1996, 1999) has developed a framework of lifelong learning skills, but these skills are considered in need of redefinition in the context of small enterprises. If, as Matlay (2000) has argued, the employer dictates the extent of learning in the small firm, then there is a need to question what Lasonen (1999) terms the 'self efficacy or the life wide entrepreneurial skills base' of employers. How do you enculture a proactive ethos of lifelong learning in employers for themselves and their employees, when their main focus on a daily basis is small business survival? Matlay (2000) found most learning in the small firm is reactionary, ad hoc and single loop learning – there is very little double loop learning, with small firm employers

reacting to the markets. If lifelong learning is an alternative to trial and error learning for the small firm, it needs to equate with business success and survival - and for small business it needs to be marketed in those terms.

A future virtual ecology: outward looking virtual learning partners?

Building capacity in regions and e-learning initiatives for the future includes the online communities of learning and outward looking virtual partners (Gurstein 2000). Small business like VET is now operating in a global, e-commerce economy (Australian National Training Authority 2000, May; Jones 1998) where there has been a considerable change through developments in information technology and new ways of trading, which are impacting on the marketplace for both the small firm and VET. Although small business may be adopting the Internet as an alternative shopfront, one line of argument has found there may be a considerable skills gap in Australian small business, particularly with the adoption of e-commerce and using electronic information to best advantage (Jones 1998). Jones concludes that the majority of small firms in Australia are predominantly still operated by what he termed: 'the 40 plus, analogue, entrepreneur'.

Kearns and Papadopoulos (2000) have found that a greater role is played by the industry bodies, unions, chambers of commerce and local associations in lifelong learning in other OECD countries, in comparison with Australia. E-commerce technology is not just a tool for the for-profit sector of small business community; it includes information networking, building business-to-business partners, business to consumer, and alternative ways of linking organisations and providing services. A significant question is: if there are skills gaps in making the best use of online technology in the small business sector, for profit and not for profit, how does that impact on developing virtual learning partners for the future?

Social capital ecology: building relations between people

There has been considerable discussion of social capital building in communities, and of measuring its added value to VET as an alternative to discussing VET in terms of economic rationalist frameworks only (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2000; Australian National Training Authority 2000; CRLRA 2000; Encel 2000; Schuller and Field 1998). Falk (1999) has stressed the importance of what he terms 'situated leadership' in regional communities, where he argues there is a 'growing recognition that solutions must be armed with both economic and social measures' (Falk 1998, p 3). He states there are two sets of resources that can be taken into account in developing social capital in communities: knowledge resources and what he terms identity resources - the willingness of people to work for the common good of the community.

This discourse is suggesting a reconceptualisation of education and training, which attempts to address the value of the social capital in the community; a capital that exists in the relationships between persons (Kilpatrick 2000) and 'situatedness' of the small firm and its informal learning networks within its own community (Falk 1998; Kilpatrick 1997; Kilpatrick and Crowley 1999). Essentially, as Kilpatrick and Crowley (1999) have stated, to what extent does learning in the small firm diffuse to the wider community, and for this study how does social capital capacity impact on developing learning partners between organisations? If there are skills gaps in small

business, one could also ask to what extent does learning from learning partnerships in the community diffuse to the small firm?

Partnerships ecology: building synergistic capital between disparate organisations

In summary, the effect of competition policy in regional Australia has found a diminished degree of information networking and collaboration taking place between competing employment service providers (Senate Standing Committee Jobs for the Regions 1999). The research on learning partnerships suggests collaboration, trust and shared responsibility for learning is essential (CRLRA 2000; Encel 2000; Kearns 1996; Longworth 1996, 1999). But, has competition policy had a similar effect on the VET sector, and if so, how is that impacting on developing learning partners in the regions?

Encel (2000) is concerned about differences in how partners perceive their investment and about developing equitable, shared responsibility for learning. For the Adelaide Hills, building a diverse range of lifelong learning partnerships may be integral for sharing innovation and new ideas, and for developing an equitable learning community capable of coping with change in a region in South Australia that receives less public funded infrastructure and therefore needs to be more self sustaining (AHRDB 2000, p 5). The development of sustainable learning partnerships are integral to VET keeping pace with change in the regions (CRLRA 2000), but there still appears to be a mismatch in workplace cultures, and collaboration and trust can be difficult to build when both VET providers and small business are operating in a market-driven, 'survival of the fittest' economy. If lifelong learning is to be sustainable and resourced for the long term strategically in VET, as opposed to 'ad hocracy', then an integrated approach to small employer stakeholder involvement is a central issue, building trust and wider appreciation of what all parties can bring to a lifelong learning partnership.

Conclusion

This paper has discussed a community capacity building model of integrated learning ecologies for building lifelong learning partnerships with VET in Regional Australia, and argues that there are a number of issues of concern for small business before it can be said that small and micro business participate fully in lifelong learning. It is premised there is a need for a more locally driven, holistic, integrated lifelong learning model of education and training for the small business and VET learning partnerships in regional Australia. This involves developing and acknowledging the value to VET of the diverse range of VET/non-VET learning partnerships between all stakeholders, which are regionally situated and context-embedded in the community.

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